



Darwin Initiative/Darwin Plus Projects Half Year Report (due 31st October 2021)

Project reference	28-022:
Project title	Restoring the ‘water tower’ cloud forests of Kenya’s Taita Hills
Country(ies)/territory(ies)	Kenya
Lead organisation	RSPB
Partner(s)	Nature Kenya, Birdlife International, Plants for Life International (PLI), Kenya Forest Service (KFS), Dawida Biodiversity Conservation Group (DABICO)
Project leader	Jake Zarins – Senior Species Recovery Officer
Report date and number (e.g. HYR1)	31st October 2021 – HYR1
Project website/blog/social media	

1. Outline progress over the last 6 months (April – Sept) against the agreed project implementation timetable (if your project has started less than 6 months ago, please report on the period since start up to end September).

Given the revision of the projects start date from July 1st 2021 to September 1st 2021 (as agreed by email on 22nd September) this report only covers one month of direct project delivery but will also provide information related to supporting co-funded activities as well as further details to the project proposal as requested in the project approval letter.

Project update for period September 1st – 30th;

During the reporting period the project team convened a virtual meeting on 10th September 2021 to discuss progress of related project implementation supported through co-funding and appropriate responses to the Darwin Expert Committee acceptance letter feedback.

Three project relevant activities were ongoing during the reporting period (some initiated with co-funding prior to September 1st) to assist in providing some crucial baseline information and to help identify further critical habitats for restoration. These Activities included Point counts surveys and detailed mapping on identified priority sites for restoration.

1. Point Count Surveys (Output 4 - The conservation and livelihood impacts of the project are monitored and evaluated- Activity 4.1)

The census was conducted along permanent grid points in the following three forest fragments: Ngangao, Vuria and Msidunyi. The points are located using a handheld GPS, and observations carried out for 10 minutes at each point following a 1-minute settling-in time; no playback was used. All Taita apalis (*Apalis fuscigularis*), Taita thrush (*Turdus helleri*) and Black-headed apalis (*Apalis melanocephala*) seen or heard was recorded, alongside time of detection, direction, distance, sex and age details where possible. Additionally, habitat data (habitat type and status) were collected at each grid point by use of a canopy scope and chequerboard. Because the grid points are 100m apart, points were visited in a skipping manner to ensure a 200 metres distance between any consecutive points sampled to reduce the chances for double counting.

A total of 405 points were visited in the three forest fragments by two experienced observers: 259 in Ngangao, 83 in Vuria and 63 in Msidunyi. Additionally, opportunistic observations of these target species were made when moving between points outside the point count sessions. During this survey period, the forest was relatively dry as there have been no rains during 2021 until some recent showers. From field observations, there appears to have been no major changes in vegetation status, with very little anthropogenic disturbance recorded in all the three fragments. On the other hand, the number of the target species was also quite low, especially for the Taita Apalis. The low number might have been simply due to timing (season) or effects from the prolonged dry spell in 2021. A broader analysis is underway incorporating data from the previous surveys to assess population trends. The table below shows the summary of the target species numbers recorded during this survey.

	Taita Thrush		Taita Apalis		Black-headed Apalis	
	PC	Opportunistic	PC	Opportunistic	PC	Opportunistic
Ngangao	71	34	7	0	1	0
Vuria	0	0	21	6	0	0
Msidunyi	0	0	2	0	0	0
TOTAL	71	34	30	6	1	0

2. Mapping of priority sites. (Output 2: Restoration of cloud forest habitat is initiated around key existing fragments-Activity 2.5)

In efforts to expand the essential habitats of the critically endangered birds in the Taita Hills, some priority sites for restoration have been identified and mapped in the recent past. However, the need remained to identify additional sites for possible restoration and especially sites that are most appropriate for the protection of the Taita apalis which continues to be the most at risk.

As such two areas deemed suitable for habitat restoration were mapped in late September 2021. An initial rapid survey was undertaken in and around the Vuria forest fragment, which remains the stronghold for the T. apalis. Investigations were then extended to the nearest forest fragments that could either support this sub-population or provide corridors to facilitate movement and dispersal of this and other critically endangered species.

Two sites were identified, one in Vuria fragment (c.6ha) and another in Fururu fragment (c.7.ha). Detailed mapping and opportunistic biodiversity observations were conducted in these two sites. Each boundary was marked and a basic vegetation and avian assessment undertaken to get a better indication of biodiversity richness, level of disturbance and potential general importance of the sites.

3. Wild seed collection. (Output 2: Restoration of cloud forest habitat is initiated around key existing fragments)

32 community members from DABICO Site Support Group (SSG) and the Community Forest Associations were trained in indigenous trees seed collection. A total 94 kg of indigenous tree seeds, representing 16 species were collected, of which 65.5kg were from *Maesa lanceolata*, 18.5 from *Craibia zimmermannii*, 6.3kg from *Millettia oblata* were collected. These seed will be used to restore degraded forest areas in the Taita Hills.

2a. Give details of any notable problems or unexpected developments/lessons learnt that the project has encountered over the last 6 months (for COVID-19 specific delays/problems, please use 2b). Explain what impact these could have on the project and whether the changes will affect the budget and timetable of project activities.

Despite the delayed start date the project delivery team is confident that the majority of year 1 objectives can be delivered as per the original time scale. As the project has only been running for a few months and activities are still being initiated the delivery team are being careful to combine this optimism with frequent checks against project timelines in order to identify any problem areas.

Discussions are ongoing with the consultants advising on the water balancing work around their availabilities to travel to Kenya to support these activities given outstanding obligations caused by Covid travel restrictions. This may result in a need to make adjustments to the schedule of works for the water related activities across the timeline of the project and the allocation of match funding by year.

A detailed review is scheduled for mid-November to ensure any required changes are submitted well ahead of the deadline for Change Requests.

2b. Please outline any specific issues which your project has encountered as a result of COVID-19. Where you have adapted your project activities in response to the pandemic, please briefly outline how you have done so here. Explain what residual impact there may be on your project and whether the changes will affect the budget and timetable of project activities.

Vaccination rates in Kenya remain low and some restrictions remain in place – however at this time and assuming no significant worsening of the rates of infection in the country it is anticipated project delivery can continue as planned with allowances made for Covid secure meetings and longer delivery timeframes.

The project team operate within GoK guidelines including mask wearing, hand washing, social distancing, holding meetings outdoors and encouraging the uptake of vaccinations where available and will continue to assess the impacts of COVID-19 as the project is delivered.

2c. Have any of these issues been discussed with LTS International and if so, have changes been made to the original agreement?

Discussed with LTS: Yes/No

Formal change request submitted: Yes/No

Received confirmation of change acceptance Yes/No

3a. Do you currently expect to have any significant (e.g. more than £5,000) underspend in your budget for this year?

Yes No Estimated underspend:

3b. If yes, then you need to consider your project budget needs carefully. Please remember that any funds agreed for this financial year are only available to the project in this financial year.

If you anticipate a significant underspend because of justifiable changes within the project, please submit a rebudget Change Request as soon as possible. There is no guarantee that Defra will agree a rebudget so please ensure you have enough time to make appropriate changes if necessary. Please DO NOT send these in the same email as your report.

4. Are there any other issues you wish to raise relating to the project or to Darwin's management, monitoring, or financial procedures?

None.

If you were asked to provide a response to this year's annual report review with your next half year report, please attach your response to this document.

Please note: Any planned modifications to your project schedule/workplan can be discussed in this report but **should also** be raised with LTS International through a Change Request. **Please DO NOT send these in the same email.**

Please send your **completed report by email** to Darwin-Projects@ltsi.co.uk. The report should be between 2-3 pages maximum. **Please state your project reference number in the header of your email message e.g. Subject: 25-001 Darwin Half Year Report**